

REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

STATEMENT BY DR KALUMBI SHANGULA, MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES AT THE 37TH COVID-19 PUBLIC BRIEFING: REPORT OF DETECTION OF THE OMICRON VARIANT IN NAMIBIA.

5 December 2021

WINDHOEK

**Check against Delivery.*

Your Excellency President Dr Hage G. Geingob
Right Honourable Dr. Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila, Prime Minister,
Honourable Ministers,
Senior Government Officials,
Members of the Media,
Fellow Namibians

1. Last year, this time we were in the middle of the second wave of Covid-19, which peaked on the 13 December when we registered a record number of 683 new infections in a single day. Last week, the world came to know of a new COVID-19 variant identified by scientists from our neighbouring countries of South Africa and Botswana. That scientists in this Region who identified what is now known as the Omicron variant, speaks to their scientific sophistication and the fact that they can hold their own in the fight against this deadly pandemic. Namibia continues to strengthen the Health Care System to respond the COVID-19 pandemic, through the improvement of our physical infrastructure such as isolation facilities, hospital bed capacities, ICUs and Oxygen supply. In addition, more Health Care Workers have been recruited and capacitated to respond to the pandemic. We invested in equipment and supplies for service delivery.
2. Significant progress has been made to strengthen Laboratory and Disease Surveillance capacity. As you may recall, when the index case of COVID-19 was reported in Namibia, the specimen had to be shipped to National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD), in South Africa for testing. However, within a short span of time, we were able to build and create the capacity for COVID-19 testing at home. At present, we have over 20 COVID-19 accredited and certified Laboratories in the country. The experience we went through last year with laboratory backlogs for up to a week will be something of the past.
3. In addition, Namibia has since developed capacity for Genome Sequencing. This is the process by which variants of COVID-19 that are circulating in the country can be identified. The University of Namibia Molecular Department has been conducting Genome Sequencing for several months. They have been able to identify different variants including the Delta Variant, which exacerbated the third wave in Namibia during the month of June to August this year.
4. As the President stated, last week, on 24 November 2021, the Government of the Republic of South Africa reported the Variant of Concern, the B.1.1.5.2.9, which is now known as the “Omicron Variant”. The same week, the Republic of Botswana also reported the Omicron Variant among four Diplomats who travel to that country between 07-19 November 2021.
5. The Omicron Variant detected was said to have multiple mutations, some of which are concerning. Preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection with this variant as compared to other Variants of Concern. Scientist are hard at work to learnt more about this variant. The numbers of this Variant appears to be increasing globally.
6. Namibia has since been following with keen interest these developments. During the past few days, two cases of the Omicron Variant have been linked to Namibia. This includes one case reported in Japan and another in Czech Republic. The persons are reported to have a travel history to Namibia.

7. Following the reports and identification of the Omicron variant, Namibia started to conduct Genomic sequencing of samples that tested positive for SARS-COV-2. A total of 19 samples which tested Positive for COVID-19 through RTC/PCR between the 11-26 November 2021, were selected for next generation sequencing (NGS) after passing quality control. Out of the 19 samples, **18 tested positive for the B.1.1.5.2.9 the “Omicron Variant”**, while, **one (1) was the Delta Variant**. The Surveillance and Laboratory Pillars of the response are busy at work to learn more about travel history and contacts of these cases.
8. Moving forward, Namibia has to continue strengthening surveillance and response, including immediate contact tracing of the close contacts to contain the circulation of the Variants of Concern, including Omicron Variant.
9. We have to continue working hand-in-hand with stakeholders to deploy the latest technologies to detect new variants in a timely fashion.
10. We **MUST** remain on guard, while we wait for further investigation about this variant. We **MUST** strictly adhere to the Public Health Measures and comply with the COVID-19 General Health Regulations to contain and arrest this situation.
11. The Festive season is approaching, more and more people are travelling to be with their loved ones. Again, I want to reiterate that ***the Virus does not move, people move with it.*** We must make smart decisions to protect ourselves and our loved ones.
12. Omicron is a new Variant, more is yet to be known about it, its behavior and the effect that it will have on the pandemic trajectory. The information available indicates that current vaccines are still effective in reducing severe illness, hospitalization and death due to COVID-19. We also know that disease severity, hospitalization and deaths have been mainly reported among the unvaccinated persons.
13. bI, therefore, urge all eligible Namibians to go out in big numbers and get vaccinated. We need to achieve herd immunity to reduce the risk of circulating Variants of Concerns, reduce the cases of severe illness, hospitalization and deaths due to COVID-
14. The threat posed by the Omicron Variant circulating in our country is real. This variant was detected predominantly in Khomas region and may be responsible for the increase in the new cases. From the 1-5 December 2021, we have recorded 695 new infections. Out of these 536 or 77.12% are from Khomas alone. I urge you all to remain calm, but vigilant to this invisible enemy.

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